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ABSTRACT

The changing nature of immigration, the job market, and the world economy preclude today's immigrants from full participation in the culture because they are without adequate education. This paper provides insights into one group of students that is most likely to have problems in school: immigrant pre-literate adolescents. It describes the effects of a literacy intervention on the dropout rate in a mid-urban school district in Houston, Texas, examining the dropout issue from a sociopolitical perspective. Data from 147 experimental and 50 control students are analyzed to answer questions about dropout rates of pre-literate students compared to the Latino population at large, whether dropouts are true dropouts, and whether there were statistically significant differences in grade point average (GPA) or attendance between the study's two groups. Results show that only eight percent of the dropouts could be classified as true dropouts, and that the dropout rate of the pre-literate students were lower than that of the estimates of the Latino population at large. It is concluded that nationwide dropout rates among Latino students are greatly inflated and that dropping out is more a function of disempowerment within a hostile environment than a lack of academic or language abilities. (Contains 11 references.) (GLR)

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Are Dropouts Really Dropouts? An Analysis of Pre-Literate Latino Adolescents

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In 1922, the progressive scholar George S. Counts published a major study on school dropouts in the US. In his report, titled *The Selective Character of Second Education*, he asks the question, "Are the children of immigrants, the very children who years in high school might be expected to yield the largest returns to both the individual and society, to be found in the high school in proportionate numbers?" (p. 3). Later in his work, he concludes that a deep and peristent chasm separated old immigrants (those from Ireland and Germany) from the new immigrants (those from Eastern and Southern Europe). While the ethnic groups that form the old and new immigrants have changed, the chasm between them is as wide as ever.

Now, of course, the old immigrants are the those from eastern and southern Europe and the new immigrants are those from Latin America and southeast Asia. It seems that with each tide of immigrants, the schools are content to allow many of the new immigrants to leave school prior to a sanctioned exit, commonly known as dropping out. In 1922, Counts, not surprisingly, did not find recent immigrants in the schools "proportionate" numbers nor did he discover that they participation in school was yieling "high educational returns."

The collective American attitude towards immigrants in the public schools has not changed substantially. The schools still expect students to conform to the social organziation of those who are not immigrants. Today, however, the consequences of dropping out or being pushed out of school are greater than in Counts' day. Until recently, dropping out of school simply meant that you took a common blue collar job and lived reasonably well. You could be assured that if your children chose to, they could take advantage of public education, making a better life for themselves than you could give them. But the changing nature of immigration, the job

market, and the world economy preclude today's immigrants from full participation in the culture without adequate education.

Educational achievement today has become synonomous with obtaining a fulfilling job. Without it, one may be left unqualified to engage in a meaningful occupation. Increased technology and the advanced skills associated with it has made once-common manufacturing jobs obsolete. The coterminous growth in the service sector has led to jobs within the reach of recent immigrants which are very different than the manufacturing jobs which have been historically available. The difference between a service sector job and one in manufacturing fundamentally alters the way one views his or her worth. A job in which you *make* something casts your self-image very differently than a job in which you *serve* someone. The distinction between the old manufacturing jobs and new service sector jobs points out the importance of education for new immigrants.

Our paper concerns pre-literate Latino students who, in Counts' words, might yield the largest educational returns. We are principally interested in if the students in included in our sample drop out of school and if so, why.

Dropping Out

Few issues in U.S. education have generated more public debate or greater activity than school dropouts (Garcia & Walker de Felix, 1992). The data, it seems, justifiy such activity. In particular, the vast number of Latino students who leave school, coupled with data suggesting that the Latino population is the fastest growing school-age ethnic group, is nothing if not alarming. For example, one study suggests that national dropout rates by ethnciity place Latino students second only to Native-American students (Kunisawa, 1988):

Native-American	42.0%
Hispanic (sic)	39.9%
Blacks	24.7%
Whites	14.3%
Asians	9.6%

The overall dropout rate, however, masks the true Latino dropout rates in specific areas, which may be as high as 78%. A recent report (The National Education Goals Report, 1990) suggests a similar national dropout rate for Hispancis (40%).

Federal funds have assisted dropout-plagued school districts in reducing their dropout rates. State legislators have also funded dropout prevention programs. Additionally, private firms have developed partnerships with educational institutions to combat the dropout problem (OERI, 1987). Most critics of this flurry of attention (e.g., Natriello & Dornbusch; 1984) argue that the problem is much more complex than currently conceptualized . Bickel, Bond, and LeMahieu 1988) concluded that different students leave school under different circumstances and for varied reasons, even within the same school. The major objective of this study was to provide insights into one group of students most likely to have problems in school: immigrant preliterate adolescents. We describe the effects of a literacy intervention on the dropout rate in a midurban school district in the Southwest U.S. We also examine the dropout issue from a socio-political perspective.

Theoretical Framework

Jones (1988) argued that the educational reform movements have ignored the diverse needs of two types of students: a) disaffected youth who are alienated from economic and educational opportunities and b) marginal, at-risk youth who are semiskilled but who cannot read, write, or succeed in the problem solving skills required in current school practices. Latino pre-literate adolescents represent

both of these groups. Because of social and economic realities in Mexico and Central America, many poor teenage immigrants are enrolling in U.S. secondary schools with minimal literacy in Spanish and no English. Increased graduation requirements, popular in today's reform movements, have increased the distance between prior knowledge and a high school diploma for these students (IORA, 1986).

Hahn, Danzberger, and Lefkowitz (1987) claimed that scholars have identified effective programs for dropout prevention. They charged that school districts were delaying implementing practices that have been shown to work. In their national survey, Isenhart and Bechard (1987) identified 190 programs directly related to dropout prevention. They found ten strategies to appear most frequently in the research literature: definition and identification, networks, academic support, special curricula, incentives and rewards, counseling, school policy changes, alternative school, restructuring, and comprehensive state plans. It is the first strategy--definition--that Hahn (1987, p 256) criticized: "Most social initiatives build on a foundation of accurate, verifiable data." Dropout prevention program implementation, however, is lacking much of the essential data, especially at the local district level. The lack of sufficient or correct data on recent immigrants may occlude a clear view of these students.

Sample and Grant

The students in our study attended a large, mid-urban school district in Houston, TX. A federal training grant provided the teachers at four of the district's schools with additional training in "functional Spanish." Functional Spanish is a programmatic attempt to help students who lack literacy in their first language (in this case, Spanish) and later help them to learn English. In simplest terms, functional Spanish is an attempt to create a bilingual

program at the secondary level. The schools in which teachers received training in functional Spanish constituted the treatment schools. Four other schools not involved with the grant served to provide comparison data. There are many features of the grant program that could be detailed, but, as it turned out, there were no significant differences between the students in the experimental and comparison schools.

Method and Data Source

The students in this study were given a locally-developed test in both English and Spanish reading and writing prior to school placement. All students in both project and non-project schools (i.e., treatment and comparison schools) scored below the second grade level on both tests. Males and females were equally represented. The students ages ranged from 13-18. The data were collected during the 1991-92 school year.

We analyzed school district data collected on all Latino preliterate secondary students. Experimental students (n= 147) received a course in Spanish literacy and mathematics and sciences courses in sheltered ESL format or in Spanish. Instruction in Spanish, however, was not available to all students due to a lack of qualified Spanish teachers. Control students (n= 50) received only ESL and remedial mathematics and science in English. Our research agenda included questions about this unique population as a whole and the experimental conditions.

The data were analyzed to answer the following questions:

1. Are the dropout rates of these pre-literate students higher than that of the Latino population at large.
2. Were the students who dropped out true dropouts?

3. Were there statistically significant differences between experimental and control students' grade point average?
4. Were there statistically significant differences between experimental and control students' attendance?

One-way ANOVAs were used to compare groups.

Results

The data reveal that of the total population (students from both project and non-project schools), only 8% were true dropouts. Whereas a total of 16% of all students left their school, only half of those could be considered true dropouts. Brief exit interviews with students who reported that they were leaving school indicated that most were moving but planned on enrolling in another school. Second, a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) existed between the percentage of non-project school students who either moved or dropped out (26%) and the same sample from project schools (12%). We suspect that this difference is an unsystematic artifact of the data because when the percentage of only true dropouts were examined, there was no difference in between students in project or non-project schools (.4% at each school were considered true dropouts).

When student GPA was examined, the true dropout group score ($X=67.43$, $SD=19.06$) was lower than either the group who reported moving to a different school ($X=77.19$, $SD=9.84$) and those who remained in school ($X=74.93$, $SD=12.69$). A one-way ANOVA, however, revealed no significant differences among these means.

An analysis of student absences revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) between students who either moved or dropped out ($X=18.10$, $SD=26.42$) and those who remained in school ($X=9.29$, $SD=11.19$).

Educational Importance

We must first make clear that we have no way of determining whether the students in our sample who said that they were moving and would be enrolling in another school did, in fact, re-enroll. As with any self-reported data, the results can be inaccurate. However, we offer these results as an initial attempt to study the dropout dilemma and as part of a larger on-going effort.

Did the pre-literate students in this study exhibit higher dropout rates than the Latino population at-large?

Returning to our original questions, we found that the dropout rates of these pre-literate students was lower than that of the estimates of the Latino population at-large. This finding surprised us because we anticipated finding high dropout rates among these students who could be considered most at-risk for dropping out. Pre-literate and usually very poor, these students, it could be argued, would find schooling of little help to them. Yet, we discovered that their overall dropout rate was lower than the population and their true dropout rate was surprisingly low.

Why did the students drop out?

We discovered that many of the students in our sample left school, but that many were simply moving to another part of the city. This is not a particularly unexpected finding. Finding a good place to live is often a major concern of recent arrivals to the US. Because initial living arrangements may be inadequate (e.g., living with relatives in close quarters) we expected there to be some transiency among our sample. However, even those who reported moving indicated that they would be enrolling in another school.

Were there statistically significant differences between dropouts and non-dropout students' grade point average?

Our data reveal that the pre-literate students in our sample who dropped out did have a lower GPA than those stayed in school but these differences were not statistically significant, a finding that is corroborated by at least one other study on dropouts. For instance, Fine (1991) discovered that in her sample of dropouts in a large northeastern high school, that reading achievement did not have a significant impact on whether the females in her study dropped out. For example, 19% of the female students who dropped out of school scored above the tenth grade level in reading. For the males in her sample, reading scores served as a better predictor of dropping out. For the male students, only 14% of those who scored above the ninth grade level dropped out. These data and others we present suggest that academic achievement may not be the crucial element needed to keep a student in school.

Were there statistically significant differences between dropout and non-dropout students' attendance?

Not surprisingly, we found that both those who moved or were true dropouts were absent from school more often that those who remained in school. Of course, our correlational data cannot answer more compelling questions about the relationship between low attendance and dropping out, for example: Is low attendance an inevitable precursor to dropping out or is the cause of dropping out? We are hopeful that sustained and careful study of our sample can help to answer important questions about attendance and dropping out.

Accounting For Surprising Findings

The dropout results found in this research suggests two possible explanations:

1. The dropout rate among Latino students nationwide has been estimated to be as high as 50%. We found much lower dropout rates for the pre-literate students in this sample (8%). Although many of the subjects in this study did leave school prior to graduation, almost half of those who left reported that they were moving and would be enrolling in another school. Therefore, our first explanation suggests that the reported dropout rate for Latino students is greatly inflated or otherwise inaccurate.

2. Our second explanation is perhaps more contentious but not, we believe, without merit. Typical explanations for school failure include poor school performance or the inability to meet academic criteria. These explanations are incongruous with the results of this study. The GPA of the students who dropped out or moved was not significantly different from those who stayed in school. While it is true that the students who dropped out of school had more absences than those who remained, these data are not surprising and are indeed corroborated by other studies of dropouts.

In contrast to the first explanation, we argue that Latino students' overall dropout rate is, in fact, close the high rates historically reported. The students in our sample, however, are not representative of the Latino student population. The majority of Latino students in the U.S. are native born. The students in our study were not only new to the U.S. but they were also new to U.S. schools. Indeed, they were pre-literate. Yet their dropout rate was much lower than would have been predicted. We argue that additional time in U.S. schools, which have typically been hostile places for students of color, will eventually compel

the those in our study to drop out. These data suggest to us that dropping out is more a function of continued disempowerment than a lack of academic ability or language abilities.

This explanation is supported by Fine's (1991) work in which the schools, often unwittingly, become institutions of silence and exclusion that effectively push students out. The suppression of students' home culture, hostility toward the parents of poor children of color, omission of students' ethnic and cultural origin all contribute as socio-political variables to make students feel disconnected from the school experience.

We suggest that as the preliterate students in this study gain more experience with schools in the U.S., they, too, will find that they are both excluded and silenced. Consequently, they will eventually leave school. The solution to the dropout dilemma, therefore, rests not with improving academic skills but with making schools places where students feel empowered. The project under study was designed for students to participate for only one year, whether they became fluent in English or not. In short, we suggest that schools must make a long-term committment to the empowerment of Latino students.

Preliterate adolescent immigrants have numerous hurdles to overcome in U.S. schools. Programs that are sensitive to their needs may not be successful in keeping all students in school. Age, family concerns, and ties outside the U.S may prevent students from completing high school. However, meeting students' needs with classes in their home language and content area lessons rather than just decontextualized English can provide an atmosphere where many can find success.

Our observations in both project and non-project schools indicate that is spite of training in several ESL techniques, many teachers continued to deliver instruction as though their preliterate students were in need of English and

nothing else. Rarely were their lessons modified for their ESL students, calling into to question the effectives of the teacher training portion of the program we designed and implemented.

Our data, combined with the work of other researchers, suggests to us that these recent immigrants are attending school, but on a provisional basis only. Given time in US schools, it is likely their enthusiasm for the educational experience will wane, their families will be further pressured into low-wage jobs by a culture whose intolerence for their presence is embodied in publically-sanctioned vilifications such as English-only laws and a war-like border patrol. It may take a generation for the overt and covert oppression to manifest itself, but when it does, school will be viewed by our students with a new and disturbing reality.

Our findings have particular implications for the jobs our students may hold. For instacne, the connection between education and earning power, as Ogbu pointed out, is not well establish for students of caste-like minority groups. Marginalized students confront a schol system run by a dominant culture that may see little point in educating such students. We suggest that Latino students are quick to understand the academic abilities necessary to secure most skilled jobs in the US. They are also progenic in the way that they understand that they cannot afford the time to attend school long enough and endure the souless regimen of the school.

The students in our sample, like most everyone in a capitalist system, will make rational decisions about the worth of school. While some of these decisions may represent "poor decisions," many will discover what one of Michelle Fine's (1991) interviewees reported: "The richest man in my neighborhood, the one with the fanciest car, he ain't got but an eighth grade education" (p. 107).

In addition, the opportunity cost of attending school is particulary actue for Latino students. Not only is their

family's immigration to America tied to the possibility of employment, but the work that they and their parents find rarely requires anything beyond servile skills. Thus, the adolescent children of immigrants are immediately qualified for the unskilled jobs their parents hold. We point out again that the unskilled jobs they do take are typically in the service sector and that the psychological effects of a service job are disempowering.

The dropout problem has pulsated between being a school problem and a child problem. We are hopeful that future discussion on this issue will include the broader social issues that impact a student's decision to leave school.

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